

Chamberlain Lecture

Re-building our communities, revitalising our politics

**Rt. Hon. Hazel Blears MP
Minister without Portfolio**

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I am delighted to be here again at the Balsall Heath Forum to deliver this Chamberlain Lecture. Your successes in community regeneration and civic renewal are well-known across government, a fact reflected perhaps by the amount of visits and mentions you receive from government ministers and senior politicians.

But are Balsall Heath's successes so well-known because you stand out from the norm? Do your achievements contrast favourably with other neighbourhoods blighted by deprivation, anti-social behaviour, crime and disorder, because they have failed to tackle them with the same degree of success?

My argument to you this afternoon is that Balsall Heath Forum must not be viewed as the exception to the norm, an aberration to be visited by academics and ministers, like some rare animal in a zoo. It must be the front-runner, and part of a broader pattern of change and transformation.

I want to explore in this lecture how we can revive civic engagement and community spirit across the country, building on the success stories, but finding new ways to ensure that the successes are not merely down to inspirational leadership or specific cultural, economic or geographical circumstances, but can be systemised and replicated across the country.

In short – how to make best practice common practice.

I should say at the outset, as a Government Minister, that no community can regenerate itself if the broader social and economic context is hostile to that regeneration. Governments set the macro-economic framework. They govern according to their values and ideology. They reflect their own history. This is a Labour government, committed to the belief that every individual deserves to live out their full potential, to be the best they can be, to overcome whatever barriers may block their path.

That aspiration is anchored in the belief that for the individual to prosper requires a strong community and society. A social free-for-all only benefits a tiny minority. Only through strong communities, bound together with shared values, common interests, understood rules of behaviour and mutual ties of respect and support, can individuals and families prosper. Humans are by nature collaborative, communal and prefer social relationships to isolation.

As John Donne had it *'No man is an island'* or if you prefer an even older source, as Cain asks God *'Am I my brother's keeper?'* and the answer of all world religions is 'yes' – we are here to look after one another, and not to *'walk by on the other side.'*

Gordon Brown is fond of quoting a piece of poetry which for me sums it all up:

*"It's the hands of others that grow the food we eat,
sew the clothes we wear, build the homes we inhabit
It's the hands of others that tend us when we are sick
and lift us up when we fall
It's the hands of others that bring us into the world
and lower us into the grave."*

So, if you accept that people are not necessarily born anti-social, if most people prefer to live peaceably with their neighbours, why and how did an area like Balsall Health, or hundreds of others like it, become so cut off from the mainstream, so prone to burglary, prostitution, drugs, vandalism and graffiti?

You cannot condone or excuse individual criminal or anti-social behaviour. We need tough powers and a rigorous system of criminal justice, which people feel is fair and on the side of the law-abiding and the victim.

But we have to understand the socio-economic contexts and causes if we are to tackle crime and disorder. And it is clear to me that if governments fail to provide opportunities for fulfilling work and training, especially for young people, if they fail to invest in housing, transport, and public parks, if they cut police numbers, if they denude local authorities of the resources and powers they need to tackle local anti-social behaviour, if people feel that their political leaders are remote and unresponsive, then none of us should be surprised if the consequences are lawlessness, moral chaos and a breakdown of community ethos.

And the concomitant argument must be, that if a government makes full employment its priority and creates new jobs, invests in housing, schools, hospitals and public spaces, grants local councils and local people powers like ASBOS, dispersal orders and powers to close drugs dens, if a government creates the framework for communities to come out from behind the locked doors of fear and trepidation and to step out into the street and say 'this is *our* street, *our* estate, *our* community' then none of us should be surprised if transformation becomes a real prospect.

So community regeneration can never be merely a spontaneous act by brave and far-sighted individuals; it takes place only when national governments get the social and economic framework right.

I think that is the point of departure I have with previous Chamberlain lecturers such as Oliver Letwin or David Willetts. Community enterprises are not a substitute for government action, nor a clever wheeze to roll back the state, nor a way of doing it 'on the cheap'.

But of course governments on their own cannot regenerate communities either, no matter how dedicated and enlightened they may be! The answer lies in a progressive partnership between a community, with activists and leaders who are emboldened and empowered, and a government which is on their side.

That's the philosopher's stone, and if we can get that right, we can achieve great things.

In every community, even the most deprived and excluded, there are activists running local campaigns, causes and enterprises. This is what the sociologists call 'social capital', but you and I know them as the local faith leaders, trade unionists, community safety campaigners, and so on – the local heroes who keep together even the most shredded of social ties.

But the fact is that the more deprived a community, the fewer of such people there are. Middle class areas have always managed to find parent governors for schools, populate their PTAs and Neighbourhood Watches, find volunteers to run charity shops and pensioners' groups, and raise funds for the local guides and scouts.

In working class neighbourhoods, such as my own in Salford, the traditional stocks of social capital – the churches, unions, co-ops, scouts and boys' brigade, womens' groups, and political parties, have eroded alongside the industrial society which gave birth to them.

Today, it is people – more often than not the women – who are engaged in Sure Start, New Deal for Communities, or schemes tackling crime and anti-social behaviour.

As a Home Office Minister, some of the most inspirational people I met were the women from Mothers Against Guns, and the women who won Taking a Stand Awards for tackling local gangs and drugs dealers. If we are looking at where the renaissance in civic engagement will come from, we should look to the women.

The downturn in citizen engagement is reflected in one of the most basic of civic acts – voting in elections. The disturbing fact is that people in working class constituencies are less likely to vote than people in middle class constituencies.

In the 2005 General Election, there was a strong correlation between deprivation, affluence and electoral turnout.

The seats with the lowest turnouts, all under 50%, were in inner-city Liverpool, Manchester, Glasgow, Hull, Leeds, Salford, and the east end of London.

The seats with the highest turnouts, over 70%, were in Dorset, Winchester, Richmond Park in South West London, Maidenhead, and Norfolk (as well as two seats in Northern Ireland where other stimuli were at work).

And what makes me angry about these statistics is that it is the people in the poorest areas who have the most to gain from politics and are the most affected by levels of investment in public services and job creation, and those in affluent areas whose overall lifestyle and levels of income are largely cushioned.

But of course civic engagement is about more than voting. Our democracy must be characterised by an active citizenship expressed through the daily exercise of influence and power, not by a four-yearly lending of power to someone else via the ballot box. I will explore later how I believe that daily exercise of influence and power can be a reality.

But let me offer some practical suggestions of how we encourage more citizens to become active.

Let's start with the young people. The Government has launched the **V** programme which will encourage young people into volunteering.

The Government has launched the **V** programme. By the beginning of October **V** had commissioned over 55,000 new opportunities for young people to volunteer.

Over 14,000 of these opportunities have been created through the match fund where the government matches, on a pound for pound basis, private sector funding for volunteering opportunities. The total amount of private sector money pledged to **V** now stands at £12.5m. Among the latest companies to pledge their support are: Deutsche Bank; Galaxy FM and National Grid.

Let's get the youngsters into these communities and start to bring their energy and enthusiasm to the table, especially youngsters from disadvantaged communities. If we can start the journey of civic engagement when young, we may have identified and encouraged tomorrow's active citizens.

I welcomed the introduction of citizenship education into our schools. But the early evaluation is frankly disappointing.

Recent Ofsted evaluation shows that there is little consensus about the purpose of citizenship education, that the subject was inadequately taught in a quarter of our schools, and there is a lack of specialist teachers. The problem is that it is seen as an unimportant subject, and the teachers teaching it have never had the grounding in the subject themselves, so that often it becomes a history lesson.

So we need a shot in the arm for citizenship education, and to be unafraid of bringing politics into the classroom so tomorrow's voters can make informed decisions and choices. The best citizenship education is lively, participative, outward-looking, and involves training in active citizenship. And it can be the start of a journey which may lead to deeper levels of involvement.

And we must move away from politics being a social taboo. We're witnessing the de-politicisation of public life, whereby it feels like anyone with a party political background is deemed unsuitable for public appointment. I've even heard that on some of the appointment forms, the space where you declare your political activity is next to the space where you declare if you have a criminal record!

The Electoral Commission, the equivalent of 'Off-Pol', will not employ anyone if they have been active in politics in the past decade. Imagine any other regulator where people from the industry are banned. We must rehabilitate politics as a noble, worthwhile and rewarding activity. In the 1950s, it was seen as something you did to help other people; today it is seen as an activity you do to help yourself.

That must change.

The Government spends millions on trying to get citizens to become active. The Department for Constitutional Affairs is spending £5m on a campaign to encourage people to become magistrates. The Department of Health spends millions on public and patient involvement. It spent £1m on citizen engagement ahead of the publication of its white paper on care outside of hospitals. Add the costs of citizenship education for school children and newly-arrived immigrants, the costs of the community engagement work of the New Deal for Communities schemes, the DfES activity to encourage and train school governors, the work of local councils, and campaigns by the Electoral Commission for voter registration and turnout.

Yet this money is not co-ordinated or evaluated across government departments. There is no -cost-benefit analysis. No cross-cutting analysis of whether we taxpayers are getting value for money.

And the obvious point is that these campaigns are often aimed at exactly the same people!

I propose that these streams of activity are co-ordinated and brought together more effectively. We need a new architecture of government to work across departments – perhaps a ‘Citizenship Participation Agency’. Not just another quango, but accountable to parliament, and properly evaluated.

And its job would not be putting up posters, but actively seeking out and encouraging tomorrow’s civic leaders, mentoring, training, and building a cadre of inspirational individuals. We’ve seen some impressive work with young councillors started recently; that needs to be replicated for community activists.

But as I’ve said, we can’t expect groups or individuals to transform our communities without the proper framework, and without the possibility of the daily exercise of power and influence, and this brings me to the method most likely to succeed: the transfer of assets to the community.

Asset transfer is a radical and controversial concept. It challenges many of the assumptions of which we based our ideas of ‘public services’ and ‘publicly-owned’ amenities.

But it is an idea whose time has come.

Labour's 2005 manifesto said:

'we will offer neighbourhoods a range of powers from which to choose, including new opportunities to assume greater responsibility or even ownership of community assets like village halls, community centres, libraries and recreational facilities.'

It is vital that these assets are not the worst, which councils are keen to off-load, but amongst the best, the jewels in the crown, to prove that we are serious.

In my own community in Salford, a scheme is being instigated to pass land owned by the council to a local community group for development. They will build new homes and facilities, including accommodation for the newly-arriving BBC personnel when the BBC transfers from London to Salford. The aim is for an income stream to be generated which will benefit the community in perpetuity through a Community Land Trust. Professor James Powell at Salford University is investigating ways of making asset transfer a reality across a range of circumstances.

This to me is an exciting prospect – a real form of public ownership which is supported by, and will benefit, the public. It certainly echoes the work of Joseph Chamberlain in the century before last, as the leader of Birmingham Council, who led the process of buying land for municipal ownership and affordable homes.

There are other modern examples – Sure Start buildings owned by local co-operatives of parents and residents, which suffer far fewer incidences of vandalism or theft, because even the local vandals and thieves feel they belong to them. I would like to see far more Sure Start facilities owned by local mutuals, co-ops and community interest companies.

There are serious issues raised by the transfer of assets to community groups, of course.

To whom are they accountable?

Is there a risk we by-pass local authorities?

What happens if one part of the community benefits from assets to the exclusion of another part?

We need a national debate about the scale and scope of asset transfer, but I firmly believe that our starting point should be 'why not?' rather than stacking up the obstacles.

Giving local communities tangible assets such as land, leisure centres, playgrounds and parks, health centres and other facilities would mean a real revival in civic engagement, because so much more would be at stake. The lessons from the elections for New Deal for Communities (NDC) boards is that when people feel they might exercise real power over the future of their neighbourhoods, they are more likely to get involved, especially people from non-traditional backgrounds. Imagine what interest there would be in the board running a community land trust, health centre or community justice centre which was at the end of your street or on your estate?

Isn't that one of the great lessons from Balsall Heath? If people think they can make a difference, that their time won't be wasted or their efforts made in vain, then they will take those first steps on the ladder of engagement.

That's how we will start to systematise citizenship engagement – by changing the power structures in our communities and rebalancing the patterns of ownership. Not the redistribution of power between politicians, but between political elites and the people.

The main vehicle for this rebalancing of assets and power within some of the poorest communities will be social enterprises.

Through active involvement and engagement of local people, through structures of ownership and control, we can unleash the innovation, creativity and problem-solving genius of the British people, in ways which neither solely the state nor the market can manage.

This third sector, home to Britain's growing number of social entrepreneurs and social businesses, is where so much inspirational activity is taking place.

This is where the social concern of the public services is married with the dynamism of private business, not to create a blunted or vapid version of either, but a new, vital force taking the best of both and creating more than the sum of the parts.

Building on the self-help models of the Friendly Societies and the Co-operative Movement, but belonging firmly to the modern age.

I think of:-

- the **Kath Locke Centre**, in Hulme, Manchester. The first social business to provide primary healthcare including dentistry, audiology, and speech therapy as part of the NHS, alongside complementary medical services and services targeted at the local ethnic communities such as mental health services for the Afro-Caribbean community.
- **Coin Street**, on London's South Bank. A social business since 1984, when local residents fought off developers to create a mixed community and housing co-operative, including the famous Oxo Tower and Gabriel's Wharf.

- **Ealing Community Transport.** Founded with just three vehicles in 1979, today ECT comprises five companies owned by the community, providing transport, recycling, and engineering services to more than 18 local authorities, with a turnover of more than £20 million.

But the citizen engagement I seek is not just confined to social businesses:

- The NHS's **Expert Patient Programme** was founded 2002. So far over 13,000 patients have been through the programme, which empowers people with chronic diseases to learn about their conditions, manage their own treatment, guide the professionals treating them, and feel confident about their futures.
- In Milmead in Kent, the **Sure Start scheme** is a co-operative, owned by local people and users. It has not suffered a single break-in or example of vandalism since it was started.

As we tackle the problems of anti-social behaviour and serious crime, we can take hope from the community justice schemes.

- **The Liverpool Community Justice Centre** in North Liverpool, aims to tackle the causes of crime in the area, as well as dealing with the crimes themselves. It serves 80,000 local people, and the Judge works to involve communities in tackling anti-social behaviour, graffiti, vandalism and noise. The centre also runs projects to involve local people, from football tournaments to drugs awareness schemes. And there will ten new centres across Britain in coming months.

- Or the example of the **Chard community justice panel**, set up in January 2005 as a pilot scheme to give volunteers the power to mete out justice in their own community for petty crimes and anti-social behaviour. The offender must apologise to the victim, admit their guilt and sign a contract to amend their behaviour. This system allows the victim to see justice being done and where there has been damage it is paid for. The offender is given the chance to face up to what they have done and reform their behaviour without the stigma of a criminal record or police caution.

The golden thread running through all these examples, a myriad of others I could cite, is that people, if given the right combination of support, funding, and freedom to innovate, can create the spark that our communities need.

Local people come together to create something new and special; to unlock, in the words of Labour leader John Smith *'the extraordinary potential of ordinary people.'*

To conclude, let me say that I believe that this agenda should be the hallmark of Labour's next period of office, and a key issue in the general election. It is strongly reflected in the white paper on local government which Ruth Kelly is publishing today.

The White Paper makes clear the Government's determination to support community management and ownership of assets. I welcome the review to be led by Barry Quirk, which will examine the effectiveness of existing powers and policies and how they might be better promoted.

He will also consider what additional powers would facilitate closer working between communities and local authorities in devolving responsibilities for local assets. This review will conclude in Spring 2007, and will produce an action plan for immediate action.

I welcome too the establishment of a new £16.5m fund to support the refurbishment of local authority properties to be transferred to community management or ownership. This will make it easier for communities and community groups to take on the management or ownership of local authority assets.

To conclude, just as Margaret Thatcher wrought a social revolution through the sale of council houses and shares in public utilities, (but with some undesirable and long-term side effects), so I believe this Government can bring about a new social revolution through a new wave of public ownership, passing power to the powerless, and influence to those denied a voice.

It is not a new idea.

‘Power to the people’ is a well-established slogan!

Within social democratic thought there has always been a decentralist, localist, anti-statist strand, for too long buried and obscured by large-scale state bureaucracies and institutions.

Nearly a century ago, the socialist thinker and writer GDH Cole called for the:

‘widest possible diffusion of power and responsibility, so as to enlist the active participation of as many as possible of its citizens in the tasks of democratic self-government.’

New or old, I think ‘democratic self-government’ needs to apply to the toughest estates and the meanest streets, not just in the heads of academics or constitutional theorists.

Through focussing on young people in our schools and as volunteers, by co-ordinating the efforts to engage citizens across government through a new citizen participation agency, and by transferring assets to local groups and communities, we can build a better democracy and a revitalised politics.

The reason why democracy in Britain is seen to be failing by some is not because there is not enough interest in it.

It is because we haven't really tried it yet.