



Brotherhood of St Laurence

Working for an Australia free of poverty

SAMBELL ORATION

The common good

Lord Maurice Glasman

Melbourne 25 March 2015

St Ambrose said that the most urgent obligation is to show gratitude for the kindness and work of others. I would first like to thank Tony and the Brotherhood of St Laurence for your generosity in flying me to Australia, arranging my accommodation and inviting me to speak. I will always remember it.

It is also my honour to give the Sambell Oration this evening. Geoffrey Sambell, a former head of this organisation, was the Word made flesh on the streets of Perth and here in the Brotherhood in Melbourne. I hope I do justice to his legacy.

One of the central concepts in the Common Good tradition within which I work is that of vocation, which includes the idea of a calling and of a tradition of skilful practice that is received from the past but must be renewed in each generation. A sense of virtue defined as good doing rather than do gooding. And I was struck in reading about the history of the Brotherhood by the role that vocation played and how from the initial establishment of the order, to the modernist cinema campaigning of the forties through to your work on early intervention and older people, you have renewed your relationship and vocation to the poor by standing firm to your patron, St Laurence, and his statement that the poor were the treasures of the church.

What you do is good and needs to be strengthened in our generation as it has never been needed more. In order to be of continued contemporary relevance you need to strengthen your tradition, renew your ethos, modernise your vocation through the ancient truths of your calling. Love, responsibility and sacrifice have never been more important.

On that note, I bring good tidings from across the oceans, for in their recent pastoral letter concerning the general election that is coming on May 7th in Britain the Bishops of the Church of England went further than they have ever gone in asserting the importance of the common good and the need to strengthen society from domination by the market and the state. They said that 1945 and 1979, which represent state socialism and free market capitalism, Attlee and Thatcher, had both been dead ends for the country; and there was a need for a new approach based on the reconciliation of estranged interests, a living wage, the abolition of usury and the strengthening of credit unions, and new coalitions between faith and secular organisations. It was a brave and bold intervention which brought down the wrath of Left and Right but the Bishops of the Church are finally catching up with the understanding of Tony Nicholson in his leadership of the Brotherhood; and it is a wonder to behold.

The teaching and practice of the Brotherhood and the wisdom of the Bishops has never been more needed because political and social life has never been more polarised—between religious and secular, progressive and conservative, city and country, immigrants and locals, rich and poor.

A combination of individual rights and collective provision has hollowed out the public square as a place of relationship and encounter, as a site of solidarity and negotiation; and we increasingly rely on a legal order of rights to settle our disputes. This means that we are increasingly dominated by a political elite that are the products of graduate schools and are estranged from the lives, sentiments and experiences of immigrants, workers, farmers and people who care for others without being paid, who are also the poor.

This is straightforwardly bad and I would suggest a new kind of politics, which is also a very ancient politics, as an alternative: a politics that is as conservative as it is radical, as Christian as it is secular, as traditional as it is republican, and that is the politics of the common good.

This has its roots in Aquinas as well as Machiavelli and is based upon the reconciliation of estranged interests, on leadership from poor communities, on a reliance on neither the state nor the market but upon each other. It is a politics of relationships and civic peace that views our natural environment and institutions as a shared inheritance to be strengthened and honoured rather than to be exploited and managed. It retrieves exiled traditions and wishes to place relationships, resilience and reciprocity into our welfare system; virtue, vocation and value into the economy; and solidarity, status and subsidiarity into our politics. The common good is part of the big story that is happening but there is also a necessity for a renewal at the roots of our society, a learning of an old truth, which is that if society has no power it will be exploited by both the state and the market.

One of the main things I wish to talk about tonight is community organising and how it can help us think about the renewal of the vocation of the Brotherhood and what it means.

As a modern practice Community Organising was created by Saul Alinsky, in Chicago, in the 1920s. He established the Industrial Areas Foundation, which trained me in the methods of community organising. Mayor Daley was the political boss in Chicago and he ran a Democratic machine that favoured the Irish and Italians over East Europeans and African Americans. Alinsky went about organising the excluded groups and building relationships between them, most particularly the Catholic Church and the unions and then between black and white.

In doing so he developed various rules for organising, such as the action is in the reaction, work within the experience of your people, make your opponents live up to their rule book. Above all he retrieved the idea of relational power as the necessary power of the poor given their lack of state and money power. It is relationships and not programmes that will transform the lives of the poor.

One way of thinking about this is the difference between covenant and contract. The problem as I see it is that both Left and Right will try to subordinate your mission to contractual constraints, when what is needed is for you to strengthen your covenantal obligations. The Right will specify such exacting conditions for the delivery of services that you will have no time left for relationships at all and strangely they will turn you into an arm of the government rather than a distinctive and vital part of society. The Left will try to make you identical to state services. Friendship, with its demand for reciprocity; love, with its demand for fidelity; honour, with its demand for courage and constraint; these will play no role in their contracts but are crucial to your intergenerational covenant that defines your calling and vocation as a brotherhood, and a Brotherhood of St Laurence at that. Without these virtues of bravery, duty and faithfulness to others there is no transformation in the lives of the poor, or

the rich. That is why I say the most ancient virtues are the basis of a modernising strategy that emphasises action that generates a reaction, rather than activity which generates more emails and team meetings, that starts with people and not programmes.

I worked with London Citizens, the branch of community organising based in England, for more than ten years, particularly on their living wage and anti-usury campaigns. London Citizens is an organisation of churches, mainly Catholic and black church but increasingly Anglican too, mosques, unions and a variety of secular societies, that consciously built their relationships with each other so that they could negotiate to improve their lives as a more powerful force.

The years I worked there were the best years of my life and were transformative for me. I entered as a Cambridge graduate in history with a PhD from Florence and I emerged as someone who learnt what was important from poor people who wanted a better life. It cured me of snobbery, in that I thought I was there to teach them but the hard lessons were for me to learn.

The things I learnt during that time are, I think, the most important things I can share with you tonight. They may help shape some thoughts about how you resist becoming a contracted-out agency and renew your mission.

The first thing I learnt is that relationships precede action.

It is the work of the one-to-one conversation, dating without sex I called it, within congregations and between them that provides the basis of trust and effective organisation through building real relationships between people. In the politics I am involved with now so much of the work is based on tasks and projects and so little on establishing relationships with others, listening to what people have to say, that it becomes severed from the daily reality of people and becomes abstract and general. The reform we are suggesting for government employees is that they actually meet the people they are writing emails about and have some sense of the lives they are administering.

The second is that as well as material poverty there is relational poverty.

Isolation makes people feel powerless to act and to change their lives and their circumstances. Relational poverty is often the cause, and certainly the accelerator, of material poverty.

The third and the most important thing I learnt was the centrality of leadership development from within poor communities.

We are not there to give a voice to the voiceless; we are there to give them the space and support to speak for themselves. The definition of leadership was very simple: someone who had followers.

Nowhere is the love and sacrifice required for family life, the bonds of belonging that attach you to a place and the meaning and experience of work so degraded, as among those who work hardest, are most rooted to their area and love each other more than life itself, and that is among the poor.

The campaign for a living wage started in the late nineties when I attended a meeting of a nun, two Catholic laity, two Muslims and a woman from a black church, who had met to discuss 'family life'. I was the honorary Jew. What emerged from the one-to-one and group conversations was that if parents wished to earn a living then they had to take two jobs and that threatened their ability to be good parents. It was in thinking about the family that the living wage emerged as a campaign that linked Protestant and Catholic churches, Muslims and secular trade unionists, in a common good around low pay, which affected each of them.

The people in the room were natural leaders in that although some of them had no official position in their mosque or church they were trusted by others and brought them into the campaign. It was led by these people, cleaners, cooks and security guards; and our job as organisers was to bring people together across the divisions and support the leaders by rehearsing negotiations with employers, thinking through strategy, concentrating on what could be won and what could not.

It is sometimes hard for poor people who have not been to university and for whom English may not be their first language to create tension, to raise in a dignified but determined way that there is a difference of interest. And I witnessed, at the big assemblies, when a cleaner was negotiating with the head of Barclays Bank or a cook with the London Mayor, the glory of it: the pride felt by their friends in the churches and their mosques was almost visible.

Through that I learnt to accept the leadership of the poor, for they were my teachers and retaught me what my mother taught me but what I had gone to university to forget: the importance of family life, the importance of where you live and your neighbours, the importance of your faith and of honest work. The modest virtues that underpin the good.

My mother was the eldest of five sisters, who left school at thirteen to work in a factory and feed the family, as my grandfather was unemployed, and her son became a Lord of the place where she grew up. Such wisdom as I have is to understand this as her achievement and not mine.

Fourth, I learnt the importance of interests and negotiation between communities in agreeing a common campaign. In all the time I worked with faith communities of all kinds there was not one conversation about creationism, the relative merits of Moses, Jesus and Mohammed, or the Israel–Palestine conflict; all of that would have led to division. Where there was agreement was on the importance of family, place and work and the threat posed to what they loved by an exploiting market and an uncaring state.

Over a period of ten years we won a living wage at all the banks and hospitals in East London, and then at the universities; and it taught me not only the importance of leadership but of interests. The campaigns that we ran came from within the communities, they were owned by them and so they protected the living wage from being dropped, they benefitted from it and stuck to it. They were not acting from a narrow self-interest, they were campaigning for all the workers who did not earn enough to feed their families; but they were not altruistic either. There was something in it for them, they benefitted and the leaders often discovered their talents and transformed their lives from manual work to management. I call it self-interest broadly conceived.

The fifth thing I learnt was that the role of elders in churches and mosques gave them real power and authority and this was transformative of the lives of the young. It was not only that we were working across faiths but that intergenerational solidarity was also an essential component. The old guided the young; and when we did one-to-ones we used to pair up old with young to strengthen that. I notice that you engage with specific work throughout the life cycle and I wanted to share that the loss of elders, of trusted guides and experience is a terrible loss for the young. The common good demands a role for elders.

In my present role as a Labour politician I am constantly harangued by members, organisers, MPs and party officials as to how we are going to increase our appeal to the young and I answer by saying ‘by building a relationship and investing in their grandparents’ and by being invited by their grandparents to do politics together, to fight for a living wage and for an alternative to the pay-day lenders. It

reconnects families, it brings isolated people into relationship, it creates and reconstitutes a dying story of common purpose and values.

And finally there is a hardest lesson I learnt from organising, the one that breaks my heart but is the most necessary, which is: never do anything for anybody that they can do for themselves. I know of MPs as well as many in the third sector who are doing things for people all the time and delivering or helping to deliver services. This takes away agency, it means that people do not learn how to negotiate, how to deal with disappointment, how to change strategy, how to build relationships, because doing people a favour leaves people untransformed. The building of relationships is for the sake of agency by the poor, and a sense of possibility and of some power in shaping their lives.

And that brings me to the final part of the talk, which is where the common good and community organising come together in a vision of subsidiarity, solidarity and vocation within a commonwealth.

We are often told that 'where there's a will there's a way' but in politics the opposite is true. Only where there is a way is there a will; and we have lost our way. People don't know where to start, whether to sign a petition against the cuts or approach the head of corporate social responsibility at Apple for a grant, whether to petition the state or plead before the market.

So I will conclude with what my critics like to call 'the big picture stuff': a vision of a political change that will redistribute power as well as money to the poor, that will give incentives to virtue rather than vice.

The narrative would begin with the assertion that the free market did not create the world and that human beings and nature are not commodities and should not be treated as such, but people are capable of love and grace, power and responsibility as well as selfishness and greed, deceit and depression and we should seek to encourage the best and not the worst of them. That is the role of statecraft.

It would argue that people are social beings, longing for connection and constituted by their inheritance and relationships which gave them a language, a family, a faith. Our political and economic systems work against the grain of human nature and not with it by assuming that we are not social beings.

The narrative would then assert that the fundamental problem of society is that of centralisation and atomisation, with the breaking of the human-scale civic bonds that generate a sense of earning and belonging. It is important to stress that capital centralises every bit as much as the state and both are hostile to resistance and accountability. The market reforms in welfare in Britain, initially a celebration of diversity, have become dominated by four large companies, now really two.

This also leads us to call for the establishment of vocational colleges so that the status of manual work is honoured within the economy and the skills of mending and fixing are given equal status to creative accountancy. I have argued that the medical and law schools should be placed in the vocational colleges because they are vocations too and need to be reminded of that. The living wage is important, but the ability to earn a living is also vital.

People do not know where to start and they often think that it's anywhere but here; but where they are is where they have to start. They need to start with the people around them, and with a sense of being part of a larger good that they can contribute to and benefit from, a civic inheritance that they can pass

on to their children, that is a blessing. Family, place and work are the building blocks of the new consensus and they must be strengthened by politics and not replaced by them.

That is part of the wider political argument that would give space to institutions such as this Brotherhood to renew its mission, not as a service provider but as a partner and friend to the poor in their desire for a decent, respectable life which is built around family, work and status within the community they live in.

This involves the church preserving those lost virtues of vocation and work, family and sacrifice and injecting love where there is impersonal procedure.

In this, the Brotherhood of St Laurence and Tony Nicholson have led the way. In the new civic narrative that must be told your example will be a light in the darkness and will lead the way to a common good in which the poor take their rightful place around the national table and are enriched and not degraded by the politics around them.

It has been my fate to be put into the House of Lords where I now organise among elites. I remind myself that virtuous elites are important. Corruption is the enemy of the good. That is my fate but I learnt my vocation from the poor.

Pope Francis in his pre-Christmas speech to the Curia said that he ‘sees the face of God in the eyes of the poor’. I know exactly what he means and I have tried to honour your work by sharing what I learnt from my years of working with them.

Thank you.

About the speaker

Lord Maurice Glasman, Baron Glasman of Stoke Newington and Stamford Hill, is not your average member of the British House of Lords. For one thing, he chooses to live with his family in a flat over a clothes shop in north London. The Labour peer calls himself a ‘radical traditionalist’. A long-time community organiser and former director of the Faith and Citizenship Programme at London Metropolitan University, his call for a new form of social and political life has influenced the British political debate.