

Faith in the Public Square

Lord Maurice Glasman delivered this talk at the launch of the *Journal of Missional Practice*, in the House of Lords, on 29th January 2013. We are grateful to Caroline Dover for transcribing his words, slightly edited here for readability.

I was surprised and honoured to be asked to speak at the launch of this journal, particularly of course because I am not a Christian. I am from a Jewish background and faith. But having worked for a number of years with London Citizens and community organizing, I discovered a very surprising thing. When it came to actual change and a willingness to commit lives to making improvements together, it was overwhelmingly people of faith, overwhelmingly Christians, particularly Catholics and non-conformists to be precise, who were actually prepared to engage. The Labour Party has become, in many ways, a very progressive and aggressively secular party. However its roots are precisely in that coalition which used to be called *the good old cause*, a coalition between non-conformist, non-established churches and essentially, *dispossessed peasants*. These people came together and tried to assert something very powerful: that the human being is not a commodity to be used and exploited by the market. Neither is the human being an administrative unit to be just administered by, what was then, the Poor Law state. If you look at the life story of all of the Labour leaders, for example Keir Hardie and the Temperance

movement in Scotland, or Ramsay MacDonald, they all came through churches and they all came from fundamentally Christian organizations. In the Labour Party we have almost entirely lost that.

So I came to you, to conversations with Martin Robinson, looking for an alliance in pilgrimage if you like. In the Labour Party we have to re-engage with our past in order to find any relevance in the present, because what I think happened to Labour in government, is that an entirely managerial, technocratic, and pragmatic ideology failed. This became clear to me at one moment when watching television with my mother. Gordon Brown said that it was the destiny of the Labour movement to save the global banking system, and I thought, he needs to make a distinction between your destiny and your fate. It may have been the fate of the Labour movement, but that cannot possibly capture its destiny.

However the *Blue Labour*¹ challenge is about more than Labour's roots and destiny. In the new place that we are, if we are to bring any kind of reasonable hope to people, we are going to have to think paradoxically and to say, for example, that Christianity will be essential to the redemption of citizenship. Now already that is to look at a fundamental problem. That problem is that, in many ways, we are still captured by a revolution that was not ours, the French revolution followed by an American revolution, where the state and faith were established as completely separate spheres. The implications were then that reason

and rationality were to be found with science, with state, with policy, and with law and that faith was somehow to be characterized among the irrational things, the emotive things, with which we are privately free to engage, but which actually amount to a threat to politics. That cannot conceivably be right. It is not right historically, empirically, philosophically nor conceptually, even setting aside theologically.

So I want to say that the conversation Martin and I shared was an enormous pleasure for me. Without wishing to diminish it, it was among many other conversations that are just wonderful, between people who strictly speaking should not be in alliance. So when I told my friends I was going to speak at the *Journal of Missional Practice* launch, I had to explain again: this is going to be an alliance of incompatibles and contraries. And it is absolutely essential that we grasp this new form of politics and so I was really delighted to be invited to this launch.

The actual form of the new politics is not going to be rigidly polarised, it is not going to be strident, it is not going to be a compromise between already formed positions. The new form of politics will allow space for something new to emerge, from conversation, from experience, and from engagement. It will be based on this core insight: that there has been a fundamental lack of love in the system. The system here includes the economic system and the political system but particularly this applies to the administrative system. I live within,

and am part of, a party and a movement that was completely committed to justice and to the welfare state. This is my inheritance. But the welfare state has turned out, in many ways, to be a brutal, godless and administrative thing that estranged people and caused people damage. We need to engage with this problem. To do that will require new approaches to politics. The three convictions² that are proposed in your journal are absolutely central to this new kind of politics, and I will go through them very quickly for a moment, before getting to the main body of the talk.

Practice of discernment

The first of your convictions is the idea of discerning or discernment. First, it is not just about listening because listening is only one part of engagement; there is listening *and* talking. But second there is a need for patience. Any new understanding that is emerging among us will be grasped at the margins only dimly. How we can live better, giving opportunities for shared discernment, allowing the new understanding to form? How can we connect with each other around this? You will find in *Labour Party* meetings that people will bring out their papers and want to 'get on with it'. 'What are we going to do?' I say that there is a long way to go before we are back in the *doing* business. There is an impatience to act. But what *are* we going to do? Well we are going to work with people, and people are going to be at the centre of this. These people are the people we live with, what

Augustine called the community of fate. The core question is 'How are we are going to build a common good and common life with them?' There are no books on this, there is no position on this, but this we must understand, and it will take time. It is a challenge for us because, as the Pope said, 90% of the world's problems are due to impatience. Now that is a very hard thing to say to people in politics where there is an ever present demand of *now*. People say 'We've got to get a policy position out *now*, we've got to get a position out *now*.' And it is very hard to say: 'No we don't; it's much better if we don't'. I say to MP's: 'It's much better if you go and have twenty one-to-one conversations with your constituents.' They say: 'what good will that do? These are grains of sand and I want the big picture.' But it is important to grasp the level of estrangement from this palace of Westminster, and from politics, and also the level of grief that has entered people's lives, without hope. Then it may be possible to understand that the only hope lies in the building of relationships with others. This concept of discernment is vital.

Practice of forming

The second conviction is the idea which you call *forming*, which is about an act of the imagination. It is good to remember that all politics, and all public life is fundamentally an imaginative act. I do not mean it is about a fantasy world. Imagination is a grasp of the real and manifests itself, I believe, in labouring work, the very hard work of making that *real* happen. It starts with the possibility of a shared

imaginative space. What I believe to be central, is that the Christian imagination and the Christian tradition will play a key role, because of all the traditions, it puts relationships, reciprocity and the idea of the human person at the centre. These values have been lost in our secular culture. But Catholic social thought has retained them and been an endless inspiration to me. This is the very beguiling and beautiful gift that the Catholic Church gave to the world, which neither accepted state domination nor the unfettered market, but looked at institutions and relationships.

The way that I think the story is emerging is based around two sets of concepts, both of which are Trinitarian in inspiration. The first of these would be *relationships, reciprocity and responsibility*, three key values in Christian social thought. Everything that is done starts off with human *relationships*: not unilateral action, not thought, but through the building of human relationships. Then within the best form of human relationship, and of course there are abusive relationships, is *reciprocity*, give and take over time. And always we are *responsible* for those that we love, for our children, for our parents, for our husbands and wives and partners and beyond. So we begin with relationships characterized by reciprocity and responsibility.

The second set of concepts are also important and apply to the *economy more than anything - vocation, virtue and value*. *Vocation* here is distinguished from 'professionalism'. The joke that I usually like

to make is: 'Whoever heard of the vocational foul?' yet there is an accepted 'professional' foul. We have lost the appreciation of skill, of good *doing*. The concept of vocation, of *calling*, is central. For example if you look at the birth of *Blue Labour*, it was in the context of the financial pressure in 2008. This shaped our vocation. I referred earlier to Gordon Brown and the destiny of the Labour movement. If you remember there was an absolute silence across the board: about the lying, the cheating, and the exaggeration. Think of the scale – it was the biggest transfer of wealth from the poor to the rich since the Norman Conquest. Overnight, 1.6 billion pounds was transferred to the banks and what was astonishing to me was the general silence. This silence may have been a sign that discernment was going on. Certainly as we reflect now, with severe debt in people's lives, we are beginning to realize that the exclusive maximization of money led to a lack of constraint, revealing the absence of relationship. Into this climate *Blue Labour* was born, and in this is our calling. It sounds archaic but this idea of vocation is hugely important.

It also addresses the fundamental issue for Labour. Jesus was a carpenter, a skilled worker. He was an artisan. But we only valued *mentalism*. Everybody had to go to university; everybody had to have abstract generalized transferable skills. Interestingly it became clear that Germany had a very different approach, of supporting vocation, supporting skill, supporting the democratic assessment of work by

peers and of course Germany came through the crash in a far better way.

Finally there is the need for an engagement with *virtue*; being able to do things well and have that judged by others. And in that is the generation of value. In the UK we had a system based on the generation of money and price but not on value, which has left us with deficit and debt.. We have a very abstract and desiccated educational system. We have a political system very much dominated by people who did politics and economics at Oxford University and we have no real connection with the development of working class people. So your idea of *forming*, of trusting in the imagination and that imagination being developed in a relational way, is fundamental to *Blue Labour* too.

Practice of joining.

The third conviction you name is *joining*. It is about getting stuck in, meeting others, and not setting ideological tests about whether they are your friends. We have neighbours, we have colleagues and we have to build something that is different and better. Joining things and being engaged is a rejection of the idea that there is a rational state. The Labour movement itself needs to invest in *joining*. It cannot be the case that Labour does nothing until the next election and puts everything on winning. It has to build regional banks. It has to support

vocational colleges; it has to do things about the debt that people are in; and to do that there will have to be a common good brokered between faith and citizenship, between religious and secular. That partnership will be explored below..

The correspondence between our values is remarkable. We always say that the concept of *Blue Labour* is that movement is everything; the ends are nothing. It is about getting out and meeting and acting and learning. We share these concepts of interest: *discernment, joining*, and also the work of the imagination, so I thank you for this word *forming* which has really helped me.

Faith in the Public Square

In one of the committee rooms at the House of Lords³ is a picture of Harold getting killed in the Norman Conquest by William the Conqueror in the 11th century: that should have been the death throes of Anglo-Saxon England. I mentioned the crash of 2008 which led to the biggest transfer of wealth since the Norman Conquest. The Norman Conquest was a very dramatic transfer of wealth from poor to rich, in that twelve Frenchmen owned the entire freehold of the country within three weeks. And, as I like to say in Labour party meetings, 'it's been pretty uphill ever since.' That defines the issue that haunts the Labour movement: the issue of dispossession. Eventually there were the enclosures; the peasantry were expelled from their land because *customary practice was subordinated to freehold title.*⁴ That is the

whole story of England: industrialization and dispossession. Once again the mainstream church did not speak very loudly. When Archbishop Laud did, when he spoke out against enclosures he was executed. But the Catholic church was not silent, and nor were the nonconformist churches, who always spoke about *freeborn Englishmen*, always spoke about *this Norman yoke*, about liberties and about dispossession.

The mainstream church did use its voice on another occasion. That was when William the Conqueror and the Norman army came to the gates of London. They were met at the gates by two people, one of whom was called the 'portrive'. We could call him the head porter, an interesting concept and an Anglo- Saxon term. The French soon came to entitle him 'Mayor'. He was the civic leader. But what is interesting is that the portrive was in charge of the docks, in charge of the water and ethical regulation. The other leader was the Bishop of London. They stood together at the gates. It did help them that there were ten thousand armed men standing behind them, I do grant that. But what is interesting is that William the Conqueror became friendly to London and allowed Londoners to keep their liberties. It was the only place in the country where there was still the maintenance of common law, the only place where there were courts in the English language. It was the only place where there was still an English system of inheritance rather than the French system of domain or seigneurial inheritance. Out of London and that protection of London, emerged

our entire political culture and resistance to the domination of the Normans.

What is interesting about this and to which I draw your attention, is that faith and Christianity defended liberty. The idea that faith is a block, an opposition to freedom, to liberty, to truth; to identify it with dogma and superstition; these things are historically insane. So if you look at the public square, there is always a town hall and a church. It has always been the case that the peace of the public square is brokered fundamentally by Christian churches. So it has always been the case that the church has an understanding of public life, and the importance of the public life, that is irreducible to either an exclusively private existence or some state enforced existence. But where we are, with this concept of the public square, is that there are a lot of people who wish you to sign a form before you enter into the public square, that says something along the lines of: 'I accept the equality of all people. I really don't insist on the existence of God. I am basically a nice person.' Or you could put it the other way and say that the church has ceased to be an active guardian of the public square. We have forgotten that in the city, the nature of having a public space is the existence of a Cathedral. So we have to break a very strong polarity and assert that there can be no development of a new politics on the basis of an aggressive secularism. We need to assert the absolute integrity of faith and the integrity of Christianity, to have a voice and to broker the peace of the public square.

However, on the other side, it is necessary to add that neither will this peace be brokered on the basis of religious belligerence. It has to be broad based and we have to recognize the very radical nature of the pluralism that we find ourselves in. That is not just the case because of a very vibrant Islam that has entered the public square in all cities in England. There are very many religious voices, there are many different secular voices. So what astonishes me as an academic coming out of *political theory*, is the difficulty that secular people have in conceptualizing a public square that is definitively pluralist, where many different voices shape the tradition and imagination, as opposed to a public square that that must lead to the domination of a single religious root.

We have to conceptualise this new politics that is emerging, this politics of the common good, this *joining*. This very old idea has two fundamental sources. One of them lies in Christianity, in the Italian concept of the city state, flowing from Aristotle via Aquinas, where Christianity plays a fundamental role in the brokering of that common good. But there is another civic tradition coming out of Machiavelli's discourses which also has a politics. We have to accept both sides of that tradition and that is going to involve a constant negotiation and conversation. Neither an aggressive secularism, nor belligerent religiosity will do it.

Here is the other thing that we will have to do if we are going to engage with this in a real way. Love is going to be found in the mundane, completely in the details, but we do need to have the big picture. You will find the truth of this in the transformations that occur in people's lives, in daily lives in the schools, in the details of the work that goes on in schools. In everything that promotes the idea that human beings are capable of love and grace, but also are capable of failure. *Failure is how you learn. Without a willingness to fail how can you be there to support people to develop a culture of evaluation, which is another way of talking about discernment? And how do you evaluate your life and the meaning of things that have happened, outside of the conversation, outside of love. The paradox is, that only in love can you be genuinely truthful and critical in a way that is accepted as good. So love is going to be in the mundane. When *Blue Labour* started, I wanted the tagline to be 'celebrating failure', and my friends said 'that's not really a great idea.' I've reluctantly accepted that, but our attitude to failure is terrible.*

I want to end with a hard thing. What is my sense, my discernment of the space, of what is emerging, because there is something emerging? It is still in formation but I want to bring some reports back from the frontline. There is going to be a genuine coalition and change in the relationship between faith and the secular and this will be in the context of 'concerned capitalism'. One area of concern is debt, because if you look at our public square in Britain today, there is the

Cathedral and there is the town hall – and they are not where anyone goes. People are going to *Wonga*, to the *Money Shop* and to the betting shops. I asked recently in the Lords, about *Barclays Bank*, which just before Christmas did a very generous thing. They lent 250 million pounds to the *Money Shop*. My information was that *Barclays Bank* borrowed the money at half a percent and the *Money Shop* is lending the money at 4000%, and that is where it begins its lending. As an academic I try to understand where the value is, where the value lies in the rich being able to borrow so low, and the poor having to borrow so high. This is where the fundamental issue lies. What does debt do? Debt leads to secrecy in marriages. It leads to the breakdown of marriages, it leads to shame, it leads to humiliation. It is an awful thing. Here is a typical situation as an example: a broken marriage, and a father is trying to buy presents for the children which he cannot afford. It is easy to condemn it. It is easy to say that they cannot afford it, but in the gift lies grace. It is an attempt to heal the brokenness. It is not to be judged in that way. But the consequence is an increasing burden, a terrible burden in the lives of the working poor. It is essential to understand that it is not people on benefits that do this – it is the working poor. It is time to use old language. This is called usury. The way that usury works- the Pope put it very well in *Caritas in Veritate*⁵- it is the way the rich prey upon the misfortunes of the poor. It is a good definition. A genuine political *joining* activity is to challenge the domination of these loan sharks and usurers, and to establish some form of relational banking system, regional banks. In

Germany it worked very well. We used to have them here: they used to be called things like *Bradford and Bingley* and *Midland* and *The Halifax*. They were all demutualised and once again we are looking at the loss of a mutual tradition and of mutual space. This is another way of describing the new politics, a 'mutual space not a neutral space'. It rejects the liberal idea of abstract and neutral ground, and instead aims to broker a common space, a mutual space.

Another focus for 'concerned capitalism', an area which I have been involved with for about fifteen years now, is the idea of a living wage. This is the idea that work, labour, has a dignity that is not to be contracted out and that it is much better for people to earn their living than to have welfare. But a third of the country is earning below a living wage at a time when corporate profits are very high. So 'concerned capitalism' will need to resist the domination of capital, to use a very old Labour term, but without relying on an administrative state. There is a need to build up common institutions, civic institutions in the public square that have genuine leadership from within, able to campaign for communities, from within communities. This is the way ahead.

Although it is hard to credit sometimes, I believe that we are in a very important moment, in that things are on the move, things are on the change. It is very easy to see all the signs of the new as pathological: 'Oh this is terrible, the party systems are breaking up and there's all

this populism and basically let's just stay in the EU, keep tax rates as they are, and everything will remain...' It is not going to be that way. There is huge change. We need big stories and very intimate relationships simultaneously. So I really wanted to speak at the launch of the *Journal of Missional Practice* because I see the work you are doing as fundamental to creating the space for the stories and relationships. I wanted to say keep in touch and we'll work together in the years ahead.

¹ *Blue Labour* is a Labour Party pressure group which was launched by Maurice Glasman in 2010. It is concerned with responsibility and relationship in politics. <http://www.bluelabour.org/>

² Three convictions and practices, *discerning, forming and joining* are described on The Missional Network site www.themissionalnetwork.com/index.php/resources or the first page of the printed copy of the launch issue of the journal.

³ This committee room was the venue for the launch of the journal, and for this talk.

⁴ 'Enclosures' describes the practice in Britain, particularly in the 16th century, where landowners fenced common land and left peasants landless.

⁵ Pope Benedict XVI. *Caritas in Veritate*. Encyclical letter (2009). http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate_en.html