

Creative citizenship and the public policy process: a flibbertijbbet, a will-o-the-wisp, a clown?

*How do you solve a problem like Maria?
How do you catch a cloud and pin it down?
How do you find the word that means Maria?
A flibbertijbbet! A will-o'-the wisp! A clown!*

Many decades before its recent emergence these lyrics, taken from The Sound of Music, encapsulate the opportunity and challenge that Creative Citizenship presents to public policy makers.

Politicians of all political persuasions are keen on 'catching a cloud'. Indeed, cynics contend that amongst contemporary political elites, almost any populist cloud will do!

The term 'Creative Citizenship' has cloud like features that politicians might find hard to resist. What politician would not want to be associated with creativity – with a capacity for capturing the moment; being of, or even ahead of, the curve; of adding value (in all of its forms) through innovation and endeavour?

In political parlance, citizenship is even more motherhood and apple pie. Politicians conspicuously legitimise themselves as citizenship personified. Across all parties politicians bewail the loss of citizen

engagement, not least in the political process itself.

You would be hard pressed to find a politician in any party that would argue for the extension of a disillusioned, disengaged, isolated, malcontent, apathetic, and distrusting constituency of support. Indeed, contemporary UK politics is presently witnessing the rise of a fourth major political party, one of whose central propositions contends that the current malaise in citizen engagement with the political elite and the political process must be addressed.

Supporting this populist approach, contemporary theoretical and empirical research addressing Creative Citizenship offers politicians of all colours seemingly grandiose claims.

Academics and practitioners report that Creative Citizenship is ubiquitous. It is new and highly original both in the multifaceted domains it addresses and in the

way that it does so. Creative Citizenship is unique, it offers direct association (social, cultural, economic and political) with technological innovation and communal interaction. Some go further and contend that Creative Citizenship presents a transformational, unstoppable movement; a momentum imbued with an alchemy that can heal, make good and which adds value across all forms of communal association.

So far then, so good.

But political leaders in each of the three major parties have traversed similar territory in the past. In different ways and from alternative political directions they have all been courted, intoxicated, if not mesmerised by similar, cloud-like rhetoric from previous claimants to the communitarian common ground.

For Labour and Blair this found its home in the development of the 'Third Way' championed in its modern iteration by Anthony Giddens at the LSE.

"We understand that often the spark for local innovation and change comes from one or two dedicated, visionary individuals. These people, sometimes dubbed 'social entrepreneurs', deserve our full support. We will develop a framework of incentives and rewards, to recognise the special people in every community whose voluntary efforts transform the lives of others."

Britain Forward Not Back
Labour Party Manifesto 2005, page 105.

For Clegg and the Liberal Democrats it finds its voice through the reinterpretation of the 'open society', a concept long advocated by past Demos Director and Director of Strategy in Clegg's Office, Richard Reeves.

"The values of the open society – social mobility; political pluralism; civil liberties; democracy; internationalism – are the source of my liberalism. And reflecting on the events of the last year, it is clear to me that they have rarely been more important than they are today. "

Nick Clegg
Speech to Demos and the Open Society Foundation.
December 2011.

For Cameron and the Conservatives it found its force in the creation of the Big Society, a central tenet of Conservative differentiation at the last general election; conceived, designed and applied through the advocacy of Cameron's then chief strategist, Steve Hilton.

"The Big Society runs consistently through our policy programme. Our plans to reform public services, mend our broken society, and rebuild trust in politics are all part of our Big Society agenda. These plans involve redistributing power from the state to society; from the centre to local communities, giving people the opportunity to take more control over their lives."

Invitation to Join the Government of Britain
Conservative Party Manifesto 2010, page 37.

In each case the broad polemic associated with these concepts has been imposed on existing party ideology, trumpeted as the new big idea - a comprehensive solution to what Cameron referred to as a 'broken Britain'.

But the translation of rhetoric to practical policy implementation has been patchy at best and widely ridiculed where attempted. These 'big ideas' have become the Loch Ness Monsters of British politics

- everyone's heard of them , there are occasional sightings but no-one is sure the beast really exists!

More substantially, each has met with strong resistance and denouncement within their respective political parties and by a succession of political commentators. Discredited and now largely discarded (along with each of their respective champions), Creative Citizenship would do well not to become the next ethereally defined 'big idea'.

To go back then to the song, rather like Maria, if Creative Citizenship is to have real salience in the public policy context we have to be able to 'pin it down'.

The danger signals for Creative Citizenship in this respect are already evident from observation of its current state of academic and practical evolution. Contemporary research contends that we should find Creative Citizenship compelling because it is abundant and defies management or control. Yet research can offer no succinct definition of the term; it points to a myriad of alternate forms and expressions whose informality of cohesion and depth of complexity appear to defy classification and/or structural confinement.

Academic rigour apart, to be effective in public policy terms Creative Citizenship must assume some form of clarity of definition in a practical sense. Given that research currently appears to conclude that it defies definition precisely because of its diverse, idiosyncratic and often anarchic nature, its place within the realm of public policy appears unsustainable. If politicians, speech and manifesto writers are tempted to align with rhetoric associated with the former, judged on public policy performance and impact, they are likely

to run a million miles from the latter.

Without clarity of definition, adopted in the imprecise form of a political 'big idea' like the predecessors identified above, Creative Citizenship might well become nothing more than a flibbertijbбет! A will-o'-the wisp! A clown!

Is there then an alternative way forward to pin down Creative Citizenship and make it more resonant in public policy terms?

The significance of Creative Citizenship is that it provides a new opportunity. An opportunity that is not so much a matter of public policy itself, but which when taken up can deliver activity from which further public policy opportunities might be derived.

Creative Citizenship enables individuals to engage and to act, alone or with others, in new and creative endeavours made possible and enhanced through technological innovation. The mere fact that this new type of opportunity exists has ethereal value in its own right, but in public policy terms, its real benefit lies in the nature of the activity flowing from it – activity that will be of benefit to the initiator(s), the communities that they participate in, and potentially to society at large.

Articulated in this manner the research outcomes associated with the study of Creative Citizenship appear to be more helpful in guiding politicians toward the key features associated with acts of Creative Citizenship that have real contemporary resonance within specific policy arenas.

To avoid adoption as the next political 'big idea' and the inevitable cynicism that will attend it, the focus for the public policy promotion of Creative Citizenship - a

manifesto if you like to call it that - could be grounded on something like the following.

The Creative Citizenship Manifesto

- Creative Citizenship offers opportunity for engagement, discourse and action that has not been so readily present hitherto.
- Creative Citizenship offers both formal and informal opportunities for engagement. It is predicated on the expression by the actor of their own free will to engage. It is voluntary and promotes voluntary action.
- Creative Citizenship is intimately associated with inter-action, co-creation and is inherently relational, it has the capacity to build and support community.
- Creative Citizenship is inclusive – by design and by activity it places the voice, the experience and the choice of the user(s) at the centre of its locus.
- Creative Citizenship provides an antidote to the previously growing primacy of professionalism; its style is supported implicitly by the growth in ‘portfolio’ and freelance working.
- Creative Citizenship fosters innovation, invention and alternative solutions to existing problems.
- Creative Citizenship is driven by the application of ideas and action that has the capacity to deliver social, cultural, political and economic value.
- Creative Citizenship is practical and practice based. It is always immediate and real to the actors that engage within it and to those impacted by it. In this respect it is both defined locally and it redefines what we mean by lo-

cality (i.e. virtual locality).

- Creative Citizenship might at times be difficult, contentious, conflictual and disruptive or might appear banal, peripheral or apparently meaningless; but endeavours associated with it will always promote new opportunities for individual and/or collective engagement and the advancement of individual or communal sense of purpose.

From here the focus can be targeted on those areas of public policy where application of some, or all of these features of Creative Citizenship might be seen to be making (or might make) a positive difference.

Examples are beginning to emerge from practice and from academic research - in planning, in housing, in social care provision and from within the creative industries themselves.

Expressed in this manner, the application of Creative Citizenship through alignment with the Creative Citizenship manifesto can have real public policy resonance – not least in the immediate public policy arenas of devolution post the Scottish referendum; the promotion of localism and alternates to state provision; the development of additional or alternate forms of political representation; the reform and redesign of public service delivery, and directly to the further advance of enterprise, education and skills development.

More precisely, those tasked with authorship of party manifestos might look for specific instances where Creative Citizenship might make a tangible impact. For example, David Boyle has advocated persuasively for the benefits that accrue to users, to providers and to professionals

alike in inculcating co-production, volunteerism and informal support into the delivery of social care services.

CentreForum's own work in the field of mental health provides a fertile review of current service provision based much more on the user experience and informal user-led advocacy that can deliver greater salience and awareness to otherwise excluded clients, and which has the capacity to impart powerful and meaningful design and application messages to key professionals. Similar initiatives might be advanced in reform of the justice system and probation service. Advancing Creative Citizenship can do much to include those currently most at risk of exclusion.

The promotion of community journalism, blogging and social media as vehicles to enhance existing channels of communication between local providers

of services (statutory and non-statutory) and users not only enhances the tailoring of the service provided, but in the process has the capacity to build more effective relationships and association. For example between pupils, students, parents and educational institutions.

Lastly, the inclusion of Creative Citizenship as an important component within the future shape and delivery of the national digital strategy - together with a budget and action plan to provide for practical implementation - should be advanced.

So no one 'big idea'. Rather the development of tangible initiatives delivering measurable outcomes, because to do otherwise will create a problem with Creative Citizenship that is similar to the problem of Maria - How do you catch a cloud and pin it down?

