

Why I broke ranks – a letter to Lambeth

Last Saturday I marched with thousands of other Lambeth residents for exactly the same reasons as many of them. Like the children and the elderly, the doctors and the trade unions, the people with jobs and those without, the disabled in mind and body, the mums, dads and grandparents, I know that libraries are places of sanctuary and adventure, of calm and excitement, where needs are met and become aspiration, and dreams come true. I know that without libraries I would not be the person I am today, they have enriched much of my life and opened many doors.

I was proud to be amongst those marchers, and passing through the Loughborough and Angell Town estates of my ward – both a stone's throw from the now closed Minet and Carnegie libraries – provided a hugely powerful reminder of why taking this action was the right thing to do for every single one of us on that journey. Our communities are in crisis and the gap between wealth and poverty is growing. A new report by the Runnymede Trust found that Lambeth has the greatest level of inequality in England and Wales based on the four indicators of health, housing, employment and education. I believe absolutely – in fact I know - that it is services such as those provided by libraries and by children's centres that begin to bridge the gap, that provide support, that prevent the crisis that is otherwise inevitable.

And they are not an expensive luxury but a small investment with a handsome return. A recent study by DCMS (*Fujiwara et al DCMS 2014*) found that using a library frequently is equivalent to spending some £1,359 per person per year on their health, a greater impact than being involved in sports or the arts. This is not wishful thinking but based on statistically significant controlled analysis of key determinants. The findings of research published just last month into the best settings for recovering cancer patients in Glasgow (*Whitelaw et al OUP 2016*) found that libraries were by far the most effective places to deliver counselling, advice and complementary therapies, greatly relieving the monetary and capacity pressures facing healthcare settings and social care. Our libraries are **already** healthy living centres, just not the kind with treadmills and a charge to enter.

Standing up to speak on my own in Windrush Square was a lot harder than walking with those passionate crowds. In doing so I defied the political leadership of Lambeth and put at significant risk my role as a Labour councillor, one of which I am immensely proud. But on Saturday, and now, I know I did the right thing, and I don't regret it. Lambeth's cabinet is faced with the most difficult of tasks and they deserve our support for taking it on: I am truly sad I had to withdraw mine, and so publicly. But there are good ways and less good ways of doing the unthinkable, and in a borough like ours the good way must always involve and respect our remarkable communities, drawing upon their wisdom, commitment and generosity to find the best possible solution in a bad situation. In times of crisis organisations facing huge pressure can close ranks, pull up the drawbridge, and develop a siege mentality. Any challenge or difference of opinion is interpreted as an attack and debate experienced as a direct assault. The elite, inside their castle, or town hall, can lose

sight of what real life is like outside the walls whilst the people on the outside can no longer see or understand why certain things are being done to them.

There are other instances where it seems we've lost sight of what our communities want and need. The ill-planned road closures in Loughborough Junction, when local people were consistently ignored, resulted in a chaotic and dangerous scheme that came to a premature close following interventions by all of the blue light services and the protestations of many thousands of pedestrians, cyclists and drivers. That was a costly mistake, and no less damaging to the council's reputation than the huge protest that was generated in response to their apparent collusion with Network Rail, or at least their failure to intervene, in closing down the businesses in Brixton's arches. The list goes on: The Garden Bridge, Central Hill and Cressingham Gardens are amongst those in the public domain, but of course we don't know what we don't know.

The real villains of the piece are not in Lambeth: instead, they are just across the river lording it over a regime that punishes the poor and protects the rich. It is Cameron and his bully boys to whom blame must be apportioned. The Tories have decimated the resources available to support the vulnerable, the struggling, the hungry, the people for whom life can be almost too bloody difficult. They have penalised the men and women living in my ward and working two or three jobs just to pay the rent and keep their children in school uniform and shoes. They have treated our doctors and nurses, our teachers, our carers and the people who drive the engine of the economy, like dirt. What they have done has been catastrophic for Lambeth, it has driven many people to – and some over – the edge.

And that is why I had no choice but to break ranks, and to ask as I do now that we go back to the community, listen to them and work with them to turn this shocking state of affairs around. It isn't just about the libraries, although they are a powerful example of a substantial breakdown in trust and communication between the electorate and the elected, and of an imposed 'solution' which does not provide any answers. There is a solution for the libraries and it has already been identified. Sometimes the bravest act, and the one commanding most respect, is to admit that a change in direction is what is needed. The people of Lambeth want to help and they know how to, I believe we should trust the people who gave us their mandate and move forward, not apart but together.

Councillor Rachel Heywood
12th April 2016