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Citizens' gain

Britain goes to the polls tomorrow, but in Birmingham Tom de Castella meets a campaign group that believes it has more to offer local communities than the representatives of the main political parties

Community campaigners who have won over high street banks and London mayor Ken Livingstone with their living wage campaign are now targeting Birmingham.

The Citizens Organising Foundation, which operates in US cities and in London, has just launched an affil-

iated branch in England's second city. Birmingham Citizens, like its counterpart in the capital, is made up of hundreds of members — from mosques, churches, a trade union, schools and youth groups — who believe that mainstream politics is failing to respond to what people want. By using the general election as a launch pad to get local people's concerns higher on the politi-

cal agenda, it aims to shake up the city's decision makers and bring power back to the people.

Kirk Noden, Birmingham Citizens' lead organiser, believes it will also help to address voter apathy. "The reason people are apathetic is because there isn't a vehicle for them to get their views across," he says. "That's what we're trying to create."

Birmingham is where the health of democracy has undergone the closest scrutiny since a judge in the city highlighted postal voting fraud that he said "would disgrace a banana republic". It is also home to the Longbridge car plant, whose future casts a shadow over the city.

Noden believes the closure will have huge social repercussions, and also raises issues of civic participation. "Most community organising tends to be very reactive, responding to a shooting in the neighbourhood or a factory closing," he says. "Six months later, that organising disappears. The difference with Citizens is that we believe in permanent organising."

Birmingham Citizens has launched its own Living Wage campaign by announcing the first step: researching what is the correct figure for the city. In London, campaigners persuaded HSBC and Barclays to pay their contract cleaning staff in Canary Wharf a minimum £6.70 an hour. The Greater London assembly, along with five hospital trusts, has now accepted this amount as its minimum wage.

But the Birmingham group is not just aping the capital; it has identified its own priorities, based on interviews with 3,000 people.

That boils down to a clearly defined agenda: the clean-up of five parks across the city; the removal of rubbish in three areas; research on affordable housing; regular meetings with police to raise community concerns; and input into the police's cultural awareness training.

For Irsan Rashid, a young medical student and core worker at Young Muslims, the beauty of Birmingham



Civic pride: Kirk Noden (third from left) with members of Birmingham Citizens, which is campaigning to give more power back to the city's residents
Photograph: David Sillitoe

Citizens is that its agenda is set by the people. And already there have been results. Rashid lives in the Sparkbrook area of Birmingham, where young people have few facilities, hang around on street corners, and often come into conflict with the police. He says the organisation has given young Muslims a voice. "We'd been trying to contact the local police, with little effect," he says. "But since we joined Birmingham Citizens we've begun talking to Paul Scott-Lee, the head of the police in Birmingham, and had meetings with the council's head of youth services."

Rashid is an evangelist for the training that the Citizens Organising Foundation provides for its members to ensure that they get what they want. He says: "We don't say, 'We need cleaner streets.' That's too general. We say which streets, we do the financial research, and see if it can be done. Councils can be slippery. We have to pin them down and hold them to account."

There is an urgent need for this new approach, he says, since more gangs on the streets means that drugs are starting to seep in to even this strongly Islamic community. It is a similar gang and drug culture that led to the shootings of Letisha Shakespeare and Charlene Ellis in Aston two years ago. "Councils aren't going to change this," Rashid says. "We've had Labour and Liberal Democrats, and they've done nothing for Sparkbrook. We have to do it ourselves."

The man behind the Citizen Organising Foundation, veteran activist Neil Jameson, sums up its philosophy by quoting the 19th-century utilitarian John Stuart Mill: "What people get for themselves is more important than what they are given."

'If we're to make a difference, it needs to be a collective response'

What marks Birmingham Citizens out from other local initiatives, says Sister Catherine O'Neill, is "that we are working with other faiths, not just in dialogue with them". O'Neill is part of the order of Presentation Sisters, in Nechells, a deprived part of the city where she says people have "lost heart". She knows only too well that safety is a major problem. She was recently mugged in the middle of the day outside the post office by two boys on bikes, who pulled her to the ground, took her bag and cycled off, leaving her with a broken wrist. But despite her experiences, O'Neill is encouraged by the consensus that Citizens has forged.

Bishop Derek Webley, the leader of the city's largest black church, the New Testament Church of God, agrees. He says: "If we're going to make a difference, it needs to be a collective response around common values, rather than a denomination taking these issues on singly."

Noden, who will coordinate the alliance, is an American with a history of organising in Chicago, which is one of 100 cities in the US that now has a living-wage policy across all contracted out public services. "Birmingham is talked about as becoming the first 'minority majority city'," he says. "Well, Chicago is only 26% white, with very vibrant churches that remind me of the mosques here."

But Noden is quick to disassociate Birmingham Citizens' faith groups from the religious politics in his homeland. He says: "Quite frankly, I cringe at the hypocrisy of the US's mix of politics and religion. It's a perversion of faith. For me, Citizens is rooted in the US civil rights movement, trade unionism and Birmingham's civic history."

If campaigners have anything like the success of London Citizens — which has spawned three "assemblies" in the east, south and west of the capital — it will ensure that Birmingham's poorest communities have a share in the city's prosperity.