

New Putney Debates

Charter of the Commons for London; a proposal for discussion

Aim:

To co-create a Charter of the Commons for London, to be launched on 6 November 2017, the 800th anniversary of the Charter of the Forest, in order to champion the contemporary need to protect, share and sustain the commons.

Rationale:

The Charter of the Forest was the first commoning charter, and the first ecological charter. The Charter was intended to ensure that people had access to the commons for subsistence, and to prevent the commons from becoming enclosed or degraded by over-consumption. This was accomplished by guaranteeing common rights to food, fuel and wood, so people could eat, keep warm, build a home and have access to craft material for their livelihoods. The Charter affirmed local arrangements for governing the commons, set rules for ensuring that local disputes could be resolved equitably and that the commons were not depleted.

The Charter provided a form of local democracy and was intended to be an eternal set of rules for relationships between the state and commoners. The outcome was that some of the commons were sustainably governed for hundreds of years, sometimes up to the present day, as in the case of the New Forest. The Charter also demanded that the monarchy return land previously enclosed for private royal use, or for giving to favourites. Sadly, the ethos of the Charter was abused at various times over the centuries, and throughout the history of this country there have been struggles over the preservation of the commons.

Many people believe this is merely part of history. However, enclosure of the commons, which deprives people of access to adequate means to support themselves, and the erosion of a functional democracy that give people a say over natural and social assets and resources are both relevant issues today.

Londoners are facing contemporary enclosures of our commons, with our public space being privatised at an alarming rate. Libraries, public buildings, parks, public squares and roads and council housing are being sold off to developers, leading to a loss of public amenity and increasing numbers of people priced out of London housing. Sections of inner London become emptied of people as former neighbourhoods, houses and flats are torn down to be replaced by 'homes' that end up as empty assets for foreign speculators. Many of the public services that still exist are being privatized, often unknown to the public.

Londoners are finding it increasingly hard to sustain themselves. The rising costs of housing, transport, food, insecure and unstable employment and falling real wages mean that many people cannot meet their cost of living.

Londoners are also increasingly concerned with the degradation of our natural environment, in particular our polluted air, loss of natural spaces, and the impacts of

global warming. Some of the biggest campaigns have been to clean up the air and to defend wild spaces such as Hackney Marshes and Camberwell Cemetery.

Contemporary ideas of commons include knowledge commons: both cultural commons of art and technical commons; software and wikis. London is a global cultural centre and is also one of the centres of tech industries. Many protagonists in the cultural and tech industries are championing the use of commons methods such as open source software and creative commons licences to promote intellectual commons. Likewise people are working in communities to co-create social centres for cultural and community use.

Why a charter of commoning

Commoning offers a time-honoured way of managing our environment, including cities, for the collective good. It offers an alternative to the alienation brought about by both large private corporations and centralised state bureaucracies. Modern examples, such as the Community Land Trust, other social enterprises and neighbourhood plans, have attracted support from across the political spectrum. The practices and principles of neighbourhood planning and the co-creation of services, are also broadly supported by citizens, politicians, the voluntary sector and state employees.

Similarly, the idea of a Universal Basic Income is becoming increasingly popular in policy circles. This can be envisaged as a citizen's dividend from the commons, perhaps paid through taxing land wealth via a Land Value Tax. Many cities are piloting UBI (references?) and are seeing benefits to people's mental health, to an overall ability to care and to entrepreneurial activity. Could Londoners campaign for this?

Why a Charter?

Charters are system-change documents, and this is what we need to tackle both growing inequality and environmental degradation. A charter can set out an alternative set of principles and organising methods to create a framework for a better future. A Charter of the Commons for London could bring together social movements to work for both concrete demands (e.g. housing, places to grow food); changes in governance (e.g. participative democracy); policy changes (e.g. planning system) as well as deeper paradigm shifts in values (people and nature above profit) and higher level constitutional and legal change (e.g. rights for nature, changes to our democracy and systems of governance that support the commons, such as legal structures that support organisations adopting commoning).

Why London?

London has a strong identity and many groups actively campaign to protest against austerity, regeneration that gentrifies and excludes, privatisation, and environmental

degradation. We also have many groups and individuals developing solutions such as promoting cycling, food production, new forms of social housing, new forms of democracy and media commons. Collectively we have the social and political capital to create change, over a locality which is large enough to make a big difference, but small enough to have shared geography and a strong social identity.

Commoning is based on communities, and working at local level makes common sense.

Recently other European cities have successfully brought together social movements to create change at a city municipal level: for example Better Reykjavík and Barcelona en Comú. In Italy a commons movement saw the national rejection of water privatisation via referendum, and local movements have seen city authorities developing frameworks to support commoning.

In England Frome DIY democracy movement has not explicitly adopted commoning, but has seen at its core the practice of local participation in decision making, and a commoning practice. Social movements working at a local, municipal, and city level have seen much more electoral successes.

How will a charter of the commons for London be developed?

This document is the first step, instigated by New Putney Debates and supported by the organising group for the Charter of the Forest anniversary events. The 800th anniversary, on 6 November 2017, is set as the launch date for a process of development. It is envisaged that the charter will develop through a participative, place based, democratic process.

An event on 17 September looked at elements that might be eventually be included in a charter: a new domesday book, guaranteed access to the commonwealth through universal access to a basic income, and Earth Jurisprudence. On November 7 there will be an event in the House of Commons, where the historian Peter Linebaugh, author of the Magna Carta Manifesto, will give a keynote speech on the history and contemporary relevance of the Charter of the Forest.

Other organisations and individuals with a passion, knowledge and experience in developing community charters, the commons and commoning will be invited to contribute to events and the process of development, and out of this may emerge a wider group of people and organisations who will want to take this initiative forward. The development of a charter of the commons for London is an iterative process, dependent on enough people believing in its potential value and adding to the process.

There are many international and local movements that we can draw inspiration from in the UK, Europe and the US.

Recently several European cities have successfully brought together social movements to create changes at a city municipal level, for example Better Reykjavík and Barcelona en Comú. In Italy a commons movement saw the national rejection of water privatisation via referendum, and local movements have seen city authorities developing frameworks to support commoning. In Bologna in Italy, and in Naples, commoning has provided

encouragement for municipal change, resulting in a framework to support self-organised community space and participative democracy.

In England, Frome, the DIY Democracy movement, has adopted the practice and principles of local participation in decision making, even if it has not explicitly adopted Commoning.

Social movements working at a local, municipal, and city level have been able to make significant changes to their localities and have also translated this into electoral success. e.g. Barcelona en Comu and Frome.

Links to local movements that we can draw inspiration from in Europe and the US and local initiatives working on commoning and local democracy:

A recent Fearless Cities conference brought together global municipal movements across the globe, with commoning being a key theme:

<https://www.greenleft.org.au/content/barcelona-‘fearless-cities’-gathering-brings-together-progressive-councils-pro-people>

<https://www.weareplanc.org/blog/radical-municipalism-demanding-the-future/>

Frome DIY democracy is a growing movement:

<http://www.flatpackdemocracy.co.uk>

Italy and the city, and the commons :

<http://basisinkomen.nl/income-commons-democracy-from-a-european-peoples-campaign-to-the-building-of-an-alternative-europe/>

<http://www.comune.bologna.it/media/files/bolognaregulation.pdf>

<http://www.bollier.org/blog/bologna-laboratory-urban-commoning>

<https://www.labgov.it/2017/01/25/bologna-as-a-laboratory-for-urban-commons-urban-change-talk-berlin/>

<http://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/urban-commons-critique-of-ownership-institutions-an-insurrection-on-the-way/>

Barcelona en Comu wins back the city:

<https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/jun/22/barcelona-comun-guide-how-win-city-elite>

Municipalism:

<https://www.weareplanc.org/blog/radical-municipalism-demanding-the-future/>

<https://www.weareplanc.org/blog/cities-in-common/>

<http://www.takebackthecity.org>

The commons

Commons Rising <http://commonsrising.uk>

Community charters

<http://www.communitychartering.org>

<https://celdf.org>

Local community charters

<http://ourtottenham.org.uk/community-charter/>

Participative networks and new democracy

<http://www.campfireconvention.com/conversations/>

Housing

Right to build @ Sheffield University

<https://issuu.com/architecture00/docs/arighttobuild>