

Review

Charlie McConnell *Finding Our Voice: The power of community education, organisation and development*. Published by Samizdat Publications, pp238, £10.00

Finding Our Voice is an intriguing book with an intriguing title. Whilst the book talks about 'our voice', it is very much Charlie's story. It is a book of revised articles drawn together with anecdotes and insights and is a reflection on 40 years of work and activism. The degree to which it is about understanding 'people power' is perhaps more in question. What the book does do is retrace the development of the organisations and policy responses that constitute British community learning's relationship with government.

Central to the book is McConnell's advocacy and belief in what he describes as 'democratic socialism'. By this he means the Labour Party, 'the only organisation capable of redistributing power in Britain' (p 23). To be fair, he qualifies this throughout the book, calling for a new kind of Labour Party in touch with environmentalism, the young and social movements. The consequences of Blairism are also wrestled with.

In some ways this continual return to a politics emerging from angst and disgust at injustice constitutes the crux of the book and McConnell's understanding of community. There is a desire to move beyond the paternalistic but too great a trust in the unquestionable good of various institutions and individuals. McConnell himself should be credited with being able to recount an activism that extends beyond paid employment and for going some way to acknowledging the limitations of his own analysis. To some degree structural inequality is understood but its causes are not adequately defined or attacked.

We are told that some will see a conflation of social democracy and democratic socialism as problematic (p 232). These terms are used interchangeably in the book and perhaps it is this absence of conceptual clarity that leads to a very interesting

defence of 'progressive' philanthropy and an admiration of Bill Clinton. More tellingly it sees technocratic and bureaucratic responses being misunderstood as people power.

This is what many of the book's twists and turns deal with in a narrative that moves quickly and sometimes abruptly from one subject to another. Some more editing would have assisted here, as would the provision of an index. The book is divided into four chapters but these are further divided into over sixty small sections, many with obscure or obtuse titles. These include: Trojan Pony, My teacher was a fascist so I went to Russia, Osler Cosla Barista and Name Dropping. These short sections tend to obstruct the flow of the argument and at times give the impression that you are merely following a stream of consciousness. Where towards the end of the book a different approach is taken when discussing the development of Schumacher College, a much more readable and interesting insight is provided.

So how should community education workers and students approach *Finding Our Voice*? Given the numerous sub-sections, the book covers a lot of ground, much of it reflecting on the life and times of Charlie McConnell himself. However the reader would perhaps be best equipped by exploring one of the main themes that emerge, even if this takes a bit of following. The relationship between community learning and the state is considered throughout. The dangers of co-option are perhaps not examined in enough depth but the author's own ongoing involvement in different institutions offers an interesting lesson in the possibilities and limitations of working within the state or its related civil society partners. This is something we all need to be alive to irrespective of our place within community learning. Indeed some insights do emerge. One of which relates to the merits (or otherwise) of Europe's impact on policy and practice. Another is the discussion of consumer rights. A more extended account of these would have been worthwhile as they are areas of work that few workers have the opportunity to engage with.

Connected to this is a brief discussion of the dismay McConnell feels at the Cameron-led attacks on the 'empowering profession' and the public sector more generally.

Intentionally or not, this appears to suggest a failure of Labour's social democracy to be adequately transformatinal. We see civil society and the concept of community being absorbed into the Blairite project and then exposed to the crash of 2008. In all of this McConnell laments the impact on Gordon Brown, feeling that history has dealt with him harshly.

In short the book is a description of the anatomy of British community education and development. Written from a personal perspective it leaves stories untold or shared with limited breadth and critical appraisal. In part this is caused by the apparent absence of an organic connection to community resistance. The profession and role of the community worker are largely described from the viewpoint of someone attempting to assist communities. Much less emphasis is put on supporting alliances between and across communities to transcend the limitations of paternalistic social democracy and oppose austerity. If read from a more critical perspective that takes this into account, the book can perhaps offer something worthwhile to our learning.

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