

Julia speaks at a South West Government meeting– see comments concerning legitimacy.

Julia Middleton, Chief Executive of Common Purpose

I have spoken to a number of people who have been here today and it has obviously been one hell of a day. It is glorious when so many people come together and you can feel the buzz and the commitment and I have heard Jonathon and what David was saying. I have heard about the scenarios, the workshops, and the messages from the young people – one hell of a day!

The commitment from the RDA seems to me to be something pretty special. They tell me that this is the start and not the end and I expect you to make sure that is what they make it - the start, not the end. A totally inspiring day!

I spent two days, before I went on holiday, down in Devon and Cornwall. Two days. I was thinking, as I was travelling down, that the perceptions of the South West are extraordinary because what two days in Devon and Cornwall make you think is that this is one hell of a big region. Having spent, not long before, some time in Bristol and in Gloucester, just the reality of the mixture and the size of this region overwhelms me. The total impossibility of understanding the rural issues and how you go forward - I find that immensely difficult. And only when I come here do I hear people that understand it. You become overwhelmed with the potential of this region, which in some extraordinary way you lot underplay in a way that I absolutely never understood. Maybe it's because you think it's a secret and it's a secret that you have got to keep quiet. Maybe that is your motivation. Maybe it's your lack of conviction. But there is something or other here that you fail to tell the rest of the country about. I think actually it is because you think it's a secret.

The quality and the independence of the small businesses every time I come to this part of the country - the sharpness, the brightness, the talent, the independence, the ability to move. And then people tell me that the South West is the graveyard for ambition. What the hell do they think they are talking about?

I am also endlessly stunned at how impossible you are and how impossible you are to change. Every time we have started Common Purpose, whether that's been in Cornwall or Exeter or Gloucester, it's been a long, hard slog for us, a very expensive slog persuading you all individually to back it. Then, of course, when you do back it you are absolutely glorious. Then you take it over, which is great. An extraordinary part of the country because in the South West you have to persuade people one by one, individually – very, very hard. Our only experience of that is Germany. Germany is the only place apart from the South West to get anything going. You do it German banker by German banker in Frankfurt; and in the end you get there. But boy does it take a long time.

The only other thing that I will eternally thank you for the South West, is one of you gave me the definitions of the word partnerships. 'The sublimation or the suppression of loathing in the pursuit of funding'. An expression that I am eternally grateful to you for, most wonderful. The energy here, the willingness to work together because damn it I won't do it if you tell me its partnership, but we will work together as it is the only way and we are all interconnected, we realise that now.

To me, so many questions, so many answers, so many questions, so many answers. But in the end, to me, I don't know most of the questions and I don't know most of the answers - of cities and towns and regions and parts of this country - but there is one thing that I think I know with total conviction, is that you aren't going nowhere until you persuade the talented people of this region to put effort into producing the

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future. There may be five hundred of you here, which are inspiring, but it is absolutely not enough. No region and no part and no part of any country are ever going to go anywhere until it manages to engage the talented.

The other day I was in a meeting in Belfast, I have no idea how I ended up in this meeting. It was a really wonderful meeting with about fifteen people there. When we were really getting going there was this little jerk in the corner, who kept piping out "What is your legitimacy?" and we all said "just shut up" and we kept on going. Anyway, he went on and on about our legitimacy to such an extent that in the end I turned to him and said "Let me just be absolutely clear that at this meeting we are not trying to allocate any public funding, nor are we trying to make any public policy. Actually in this meeting are the fifteen people that are the only people in Northern Ireland that have done anything for the homeless in Northern Ireland for the last 10 years. That is our legitimacy and it is a totally compelling and overwhelming legitimacy".

I believe with a passion that there is a democratic space. There is an enormous space in it for politicians. They call the shots. They are accountable. That is right and proper. But there is another space for leaders of civil society. We have to persuade our talent in every part of the country and particularly the South West, where you have so much talent, to wake up and be part of the solutions.

Who are leaders of civil society? Well men! White men! And usually swanky men. White, swanky men! No - that's out of date. I think the world is moving on. The danger, of course, is that those definitions is its actually quite satisfying to say "Well, they are the leaders and I don't actually have to behave like a leader". Hugely satisfying, as usually you can go back to sleep. I believe passionately in the definition of civil society of Mr Mandela, who says that civil society is anyone who stands up. Anybody who stops crouching down and stops trying to be taller than everybody else and standing out and who is too embarrassed to be taller than anybody else and actually civil society are anyone who actually stands up and makes things happen.

They are leaders of civil society but that doesn't mean that they have to lead all the time. Sometimes the most extraordinary thing is to follow. I met somebody on our programme the other day and she said to me "What am I going to do? I can't possibly do anything extraordinary." And I said "Look at this group. Who do you see here that is extraordinary?" And she said "Him". And I said "Well go and help him. It doesn't need to be yours. It makes it absolutely impossible for him not to act if you're on his back anyhow." It's tremendously important to persuade people, either in their main life or in their other life.

I met somebody who had been on our Johannesburg programme the other day and he runs an enormous call centre just outside of Johannesburg. And he came to see me and he was on one of our first programmes and he said "Julia, I am now really rich" and I said "Cool" and he said "No, no you don't understand, I am now seriously rich" and I said "Well done" and he said "Now I want to start a foundation" So he talked about the foundation for a while and the truth is that in the end we concluded that actually South Africa doesn't need any more foundations, but instead of him employing 700 people, he must now go and employ 1500 because that is 1500 families that he is supporting just outside of Johannesburg. That was his unique contribution. Everybody has to find their own way of doing it.

I believe passionately that we have to regain this space, this space for civil society. We have to persuade people to carry on. Whether you can produce one vision or not, I do not know, but you will need an awful lot of people energetically making everything happen.

For the last few months I have been doing a great deal of work in the ‘vision free zones’ of universities. There, of course, is a running joke that I take an interest in anything new that my son or daughter may be doing. They are the most extraordinary vision free zones. You go in and, as you probably know, there are a lot more volunteering schemes in universities at the moment, largely to stop them behaving like armies of occupation. You go in to year twos and you say to them “you are not volunteering because it looks good on your CVs. You are volunteering because this is the beginning of your career as a citizen.” They all look totally panicked and you tell them that it is alright as you have not come to give them a lecture on voting. And in truth, I am the last person on earth to give anyone a lecture on voting, as I only vote as I can’t quite face not voting. I know I’m passionately pro and the importance of it, but I also believe in this other space and “I have not come to give you a lecture on joining a political party. I want to tell you about another space and I want you all to be school governors by the time you are 25. No, that does not mean that you are going to sit on a board, with the emphasis on your arse sitting heavily on a board. You are going to be part of the leadership of an organisation that will set the standards that your brothers and sisters are currently receiving in schools. You will raise them and demand things of them. Demand of the Head Teacher, if you think that’s good enough – “I want this”. You must be part of it and part of civil society.”

Every child in my house is allowed to have any poster they like, except one they all have to have. One. It’s a picture of Martin Luther King and it says “It’s not the bad people I can’t forgive, it’s the good people who do nothing.” I believe with a passion that the future for the South West, the future for all of us and our only ability to persuade our young people will be if we develop other spaces and we persuade people of talent in the South West to give us their best and to be good. Thank you.