



Interview with Michael Albert at launch of Collaboration for Change Saturday 6 October 2018

Marian: *First of all, thank you so much for coming across the Atlantic to be with us here in Derry on the 50th anniversary of the start of the civil rights movement.*

Michael: Thank you for having me.

Marian: *Very welcome. It's a pleasure. We've had a morning looking at collaborating for change, starting to get to know each other, starting to explore ways that we may even think of working together. We're not looking to you for answers but it's great to hear from your experience on what your thoughts are just coming from this morning.*

Michael: Well, first it's an exemplary effort I think, in other words, to tackle the problem of not just pursuing each agenda that exists, effectively—that's important—but to actually combine those agendas into some process that is collaborative and that each component is helping the rest, that's exemplary. It's not very common. I don't know about Ireland so much but nowhere is it very common for people to realise that's a paramount task and to undertake it. So, I think that's good and the response at the meeting seems good. Of course, the proof is always in the pudding later, not imminently, but the participation seems really excellent and people's energy seems excellent, so it seems like it has real potential.

Marian: *We have invited as many people that we could think of who we know are working on positive, radical solutions. What are the challenges we are going to face in actually collaborating?*

Michael: That again is an exemplary question. I guess that I would say, on the one hand, it's sort of obvious things – the time pressures that the people who you're talking to face. The other pressures that they face, emotional pressures, family pressures, and so on, give them all limited time availability, limited energy availability. So, when they're deciding on whether or not to do something new or do something in addition, their inclination is yes but the pressures are no and so overcoming that, I think, is a big issue. So, that's one and the second one would be providing a degree of shared agenda, which encompasses and yet respects all the ones that are invited. I'm sure there are others but those two problems, I think, will surface and will be an issue for you. Overcoming them will be essential.

I should just say, I suppose, I think people's reactions are sensible. People do have shortages of time and do have to make judgements about what they do. The way that a new effort can deal with that problem is to provide so much support and so much pleasure, or both, that the people feel it's



worth their time. So, if the collaboration improves their other projects, that frees up some of their time. If the collaboration gives them enough emotional sustenance and pleasure that it makes their lives brighter, that also provides an incentive to stay. Too often the Left doesn't think about either of those impacts and yet those impacts are critical to people staying; people leaving is the main stumbling point of these kinds of projects.

Marian: *Something that did come up this morning was about looking after ourselves and I think that is really important.*

Michael: Yeah, and it's given a lot of lip service so people do talk about it, at least where I'm from on the Left but it isn't really done very well and it isn't really prioritised along with everything else but it should be. If joining projects to try to make the world better makes your life worse, you have a hard time believing after a while that it has any chance of making anything better for anybody else. So, there's a utilitarian purpose as well as just a human purpose. The human purpose is we should be better off and we should want people better off but the utilitarian purpose is that really, if you join movements and projects and you are more stressed and you are more hassled and you're more afraid and your social life declines and your sex life declines, everything declines, how long are you going to stay? Especially since all of those declines are basically indicators—you might not talk about it but they're indicators—that sort of tell you it's unlikely that it's going to make anybody else's life better. If it doesn't make my life better among 50 or 100 or 200 people, how's it going to make a whole country better? So, it is a priority or it should be a priority to deal with. I think we'll be well on our way when we're collaborating and when our projects and movements have their own socials and their own sports leagues and their own other phenomena, along with talking and with giving talks and with having demonstrations, which better people's lives. Even sharing material resources internally. Those kinds of things matter.

Marian: *From your experience, can you think of or give any examples that are going to enable decision-making and for me, this is really crucial?*

Michael: How do we make decisions? I would reckon that most people in the room this morning would say "yes, it needs to be a democratic decision-making process."

Marian: *But we also all know that sometimes that can be really difficult. Any advice or anything from your experience on that?*

Michael: I think "one person-one vote democracy", "majority rules", "two thirds-one third consensus", all of these things are tactics, they're really not principles. None of them apply all the



time. It doesn't make any sense to have one person-one vote, much less consensus, over what you wear to the meeting. That's your decision, and so on. So, some things are for narrower choice and decision, and some things are for wider decision, and some things should give people more input. I think the norm or the real principle should be self-management. Collective self-management. Which is that people should have a say in decisions to the degree they're affected by them, and you accomplish that by those choices you make between democracy and the rest. So, that's one part of the answer. But there's another part of the answer which is that we know, from my experience, take the US, we know that democracy or any of these approaches depends on the algorithm of how you count votes. Any of these is worthless if your group of people does not have the same information, isn't in a position to have an opinion. So, that basically what they're doing is choosing "I'll follow that person" or "I'll follow that person" among those who have the information and who have the confidence and the circumstances to even have an opinion, much less an informed opinion.

So, to have real democracy and organisation or real self-management in an organisation, the organisation has to function in such a way that everybody in it is comparably empowered. Comparably confident. Comparably prepared to have an opinion and to be able to express the opinion and participate. It doesn't matter if you have formal democracy but everybody is sitting there quiet and waiting for the people with the information to deliver, essentially to dictate, although it's formalised as a vote, what's going to happen. And that means I think, your organisation has to look at what it does, look at its activities and distribute them among its membership in such a way that you don't have some people who are doing all the chairing and all of the preparation of the meeting and all of the conceptual and empowering work and other people who are just following out orders and doing rote work. If you do that, the former is going to dominate the latter, even though they're wonderful people and they don't want to. It doesn't matter. If you have that structure, that'll be the result. So, I think the key issue for a real democratic organisation involves not so much the vote pattern, as the processes that it functions by and whether they prepare everybody to have an opinion and express it, and so on.

Let me just say one more thing on that. You could imagine some obstacles to that. So, imagine an organisation, let's go back 50 years, and it's trying to make social change and it's got some blacks and some whites in it and the black people are doing all the rote activities and the white people are, at least a subset of white people is doing the empowered activities that gives them skills, confidence and knowledge. Okay, so that is racism interfering with getting a circumstance where people can really fully participate. You can imagine the exact same thing for sexism, if the women are getting coffee for people and obediently listening and then they have a vote – okay, well, and then they have the vote is just a formality. That's race and gender, what we don't understand is the same thing holds around class but it's not because inside our organisations we have owners, because we don't. Virtually no movement organisations incorporate internal owners who then get all the say. We get that. What we don't get is that in society, they are managers and lawyers and they are doctors and engineers and so on, and these people monopolise in power and work and they come



into the organisation and they're prepared. Working people who are doing rote work all day long and repetitive work all day long, and who also haven't been educated and didn't enjoy the same kind of circumstances, come in and they're more trained essentially to endure boredom and to take orders. If we replicate that, of course democracy goes out the window, even if you have votes. That's what addressing the empowering circumstances inside the organisation does.

But people come in differentiated in the first place? People come in and some are effectively ready to be a great lawyer or something and now, they're in the movement so they're a great orator. The other person comes in and has been trained to work on an assembly line and now he/she is in the movement and punching things or doing rote stuff. So, you have to redress the imbalance if you really want a democratic organisation.

Marian: *It's really important to be thinking about this at the beginning of our process rather than looking back and wondering where we went wrong.*

Michael: Exactly. 50 years ago, the women's movement would...so, I'm in a big anti-war meeting and I'm chairing the meeting and all of a sudden, the door opens and 50 women come in. There was, of course, women in the room before that but these 50 women are organised, feministly strong, and they say to me "Michael, sit down." I'm not an idiot. I sit down and the 50 women in the front room say "we're going to operate differently from now on in this anti-war movement or there's not going to be one, from now on, half the speakers are women at least, half the people that are chairing the meetings are women at least, half the people who are developing the programme are women at least, and if that doesn't happen you will have to deal with our disruption." The men would say "yeah but wait a minute, we got to end the war and you're not ready for this and that'll weaken the organisation." The women say back "sexism weakens the organisation; sexism makes it impossible to proceed, in the long term, and that's what we need to overcome while we also fight against the war."

Alright, so imagine the same thing happening around class. It hasn't yet. It has not happened, or at least by what I mean by class. So, imagine a movement organisation or a movement project in which basically the people in it, and this is comparable in the analogy to women, the people in it who are from your working-class circumstances—background, current job—as compared to the people in the movement who are from what I would call coordinator class circumstances. They are the lawyers or doctors or whatever they are, and they have all the confidence and they have the verbal skills and they have the training and you know they expect to rule and the workers don't. And imagine the workers finally say "enough", like the women said enough. They say "we're going to redress this; from now on, internally, the following things are going to happen..." That would be amazing and it would also make the prospects of social change vastly higher. Of course, those doctor/lawyer types and highly educated young people, if it's a young person, whatever it is, would



be horrified initially. “What are you talking about? I know what I’m doing, you don’t.” First of all, they don’t know what they’re doing and the reason is because they don’t know this, they don’t know the need really to address class internally if you’re going to address it externally. And second of all, you can’t win without everybody participating. So, you have to deal with this too. So, in a sense, around class, we have to do the same thing that has been done—not completed fully—but been done to a degree about race and gender. But it’s not class [in the sense of] Bill Gates, it’s not class [in the sense of] the one percent of capitalists, that has to be dealt with. It’s the class dynamic inside our organisations which is in society, and has to be dealt with in both places, and that’s the dynamic between those excluded from empowering work and those doing it.

Marian: *I like what you said this morning about trusting the expertise within your coalition/collaboration. So, it’s the group of people who are most affected by circumstances, by issues, who are the experts on those issues/circumstances. So, I’m just picturing the group of people who are working-class who, because of their circumstances, haven’t been able to get an education, to get into the professional class with all the perks of that, those are the people who are the experts on the working-class and so for a successful collaboration, we need to be listening to those people, we need to be following their agenda and the same way in the collaboration we are following the agenda of women, we are following the agenda of ethnic groups who are in a minority in this particular circumstance.*

Michael: I think that’s right. It’s not to minimise the fact that somebody can be so timid or so unaware of circumstances that they’re not ready to just jump in but then you redress that so movements should have a political education and even a social education internally. But there’s a myth in this which is the ones that have all the education know what they’re doing. They don’t. They know how to do some things, I suppose—I mean sometimes I even wonder about that, whether they know how to do the things that they’re trained to do—but the idea that they understand society or they understand the relations with people better, it’s just nonsense. Just like it was nonsense for women and it was nonsense for blacks that they couldn’t do anything or didn’t know anything or whatever, or that whites understood race better than blacks did once upon a time. No. Yeah, maybe one or two whites who immersed themselves. Maybe. Probably not, but maybe. So, yes, it has to happen. So, our challenge is in listening and being prepared to step outside our own comfort zones so that we’re sharing out the interesting work along with the necessary mundane work, and looking after ourselves as well.



Marian: *I really liked what you were saying about making sure that what we're doing enhances our lives rather than it being extra work in our lives.*

Michael: It's not your first priority. That is to say, well, people think to themselves, well, I'm trying to change the world and that means I have to make sacrifices, and I have to be willing to do that and it's risky at times, it takes me away from the possibility of earning more, and so on and so forth. Well, that's true and you do have to make some sacrifices, I suppose. But that doesn't mean you have to make yourself so miserable that you burn out and that you're useless to the thing that you said you wanted to do. So, taking care of self does matter. It shouldn't be exaggerated to such an extent that what we create, and this happens, that what we create is basically designed to make us feel good. That's not the solution either. So, neither of those extremes, but certainly we need to feel good enough and fulfilled enough so that the path that we're on is sustainable.

Marian: *Would you like to give a last message to Collaboration for Change as we start our process?*

Michael: Rosa Luxemburg, the German revolutionary, she once said, "you lose, you lose, you lose, you win." It's not always true. You could lose, lose, lose and completely lose. But if you learn from what's happening and you take lessons, then potentially the pattern of seeming losses prepares you to win. You're going to have a hard time but in generating collaboration on a large scale, it's going to happen at some point, might as well be when you're doing it but you will have obstacles and the trick is not to resist them in a sense, not to deny them, not explain them as other than having to do with mistakes and wrong choices, but to see what the mistakes and wrong choices are and correct them.